

“TALK STORY”: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR: MEMOIRS OF A GIRLHOOD AMONG GHOSTS*

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ABSTRACT

Maxine Hong Kingston, a fiercely feminist writer of contemporary times states in her autobiographical book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), “the swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar... What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are as follows- ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance- not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words.” With a narrative style that threatens to disrobe the hegemony of Chinese American racism, Kingston is a “word warrior” who battles social and racial injustice through a woman’s perspective. It is perhaps surprising that Kingston could not speak English until she started school. Once she had learned it, however, she started to talk stories. Decades later, this once silent and silenced woman metamorphosed into a notable American writer.

KEYWORDS: “Talk Story”, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*

INTRODUCTION

Maxine Hong Kingston was born to Chinese immigrant parents, Tom Hong and Chew Ying Lan, in Stockton, California, on 27 October 1940. Her American name, Maxine, was after a blonde who was always lucky in gambling. Her Chinese name, Ting Ting comes from a Chinese poem about self-reliance. Kingston recalls the early part of her school education as her “silent years” in which she had a terrible time talking to other children. This particular phase is portrayed by Maxine in the most notable manner in the last chapter of her famous book *The Woman Warrior*. “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness- a shame- still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say “hello” casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter. A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day’s courage.... During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten.” Maxine, who flunked kindergarten, later became a “straight A” student and won a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. In 1962 she got her bachelor’s degree in English and married Earll Kingston, a Berkeley graduate and an actor. She returned to the university in 1964, earned a teaching certificate in 1965, and taught English and mathematics from 1965 to 1967 in Hayward, California. During their time at Berkeley, the Kingstons were involved in the antiwar movement on campus. In 1967 they decided to leave the country because the movement was getting more and more violent, and their friends were too involved in drugs. On their way to Japan the Kingstons stopped in Hawaii and stayed there for seventeen years.

Initially, Kingston taught language, arts and English as a second language in a private school. She became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii at Honolulu in 1977. A few days after she finished the final revisions of *China Men* (1980), a Honolulu Buddhist sect claimed Kingston as a “Living treasure of Hawaii.” Kingston herself,

however, was still looking homeward, having always felt like a displaced individual in the islands. She and her husband moved back to California, while their son Joseph, stayed in Hawaii and became a musician. In 1992 Kingston became a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Kingston weaves her magic in pen through two weapons- memory and imagination. “We approach the truth with metaphors,” declared Kingston in a 1983 essay, “An Imagined Life.” She told Paula Rabinowitz in a 1987 interview, “the artist’s memory winnows out; it edits for what is important and significant. Memory, my own memory, shows me what is unforgettable, and helps me get to an essence that will not die, and that haunts me until I can get it into a form, which is writing.” Kingston denies, however, that the use of memory in her writing is simply a form of exorcism, but she insists that it is a way to give substance to the “ghosts” or “visions,” in her life. Her writing also denies classification since she is recording the biography of a people’s imagination. Her first two books are dedicated to her ancestors whom she has never met and records of things about which she has only heard, hence biographies. Her father’s arrival in America in *China Men* is portrayed via her imagination. She is proud of this imaginative feat because by inserting multiple stories into her “biographical” works she is able to transcend generic boundaries and protect the illegal aliens she is writing about the same time. “To have a right imagination is very powerful,” Kingston told Rabinowitz, “because it’s a bridge between reality.”

The major beacon lights of Kingston’s “memory and imagination” are her mother’s stories and her father’s silence. Kingston’ father, Tom Hong, was a scholar trained in traditional Chinese classics and a teacher in New Society Village before his immigration. In the United States he washed windows until he saved enough money to start a laundry in New York with three of his friends who cheated him of his partnership. He moved with his pregnant wife to Stockton and started managing an illegal gambling house for a wealthy Chinese American. A major part of his work, besides taking care of the club, was to be arrested; he was silent about his true name and invented a new name for each arrest. This fact can be ascertained from Kingston’s narration in the novel *The Woman Warrior* where she mentions how an immigrant knew the skills of saving oneself from an unwanted arrest by the American authorities. That almost all the Chinese looked similar in facial outlook and Americans having a poor memory, made the Chinese change their houses and identities as frequently and conveniently as they could. The onslaught of World war II put him under a phase of unemployment, after which he started his own laundry and started a new life with his family in America.

Brave Orchid (or Yin Lan, in Chinese), Kingston’s vocal and practical mother, was a doctor who practised Western medicine and midwifery in China. She did not join her husband in New York until 1940, fifteen years after they had parted. In America, Brave Orchid exchanged her professional status for that of a laundrywoman, cleaning maid, tomato picker, and cannery worker. Undaunted by the difficulties in her life, this “champion talker” educated her children with “talk stories,” which included myth, legend, family history and ghost tales. “Night after night my mother would talk story until we fell asleep. I could not tell where the stories left off and the dreams began,” Kingston recalls in *The Woman Warrior*. Through her talk stories, Brave Orchid extended Chinese tradition into the lives of her American children and enriched their imagination. Yet Kingston is also aware of the fact that the mother’s stories were double- edged: “She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan,” recollects Kingston in *The Woman Warrior*, a stark contrast elicited by Kingston’s mother in retaliation to the meek submission to the theory of “double marginalization”- as a woman in a men’s society and as an exotic Asian in the White man’s world. While Brave Orchid’s storytelling was educational, it also reiterated patriarchal and misogynistic messages of traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, as in traditional Chinese education, Brave Orchid did not explain her stories. Kingston needed, as she

grew, to interpret her mother's stories and became a storyteller herself.

Her community also played a decisive role in Kingston's writing. Comparing herself to Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko, Kingston argues that what makes their writings vivid and alive is their connection with community and tribe. Yet Kingston refuses to be "representative" of Chinese Americans. "A Stockton Chinese is not the same as a San Francisco Chinese," Kingston stated in an interview with Arturo Islas. Unlike "the Big City" (San Francisco) and "the Second City" (Sacramento), Stockton, a city in the Central Valley of California, has a relatively small Chinese population. At most the Stockton Chinese American community is a minor subculture of Chinese America. Yet Stockton became a "literary microcosm" for Kingston, whose knowledge of China derives from its people. And the language spoken in this community, a Cantonese dialect called 'Say Yup', supplies Kingston with distinctive sounds and rhythms. It transparently comes out that Kingston has transformed and translated the Chinese oral tradition into a written one.

The physical environment and the community as part of the geographical component in which Kingston grew up played an important role in her "education" as a writer. Kingston spent her childhood on the south side of Stockton, an area populated by mostly working-class and unemployed people of mixed races. The "Burglar Ghosts," "Hobo Ghosts," and "Wino Ghosts" that crowded young Maxine's childhood memory testify to the importance of street wisdom and survival skills. Kingston insists on the audiotape "Maxine Hong Kingston: Talking Story" (1990) where she voices out loud and clear that - had she been born in a middle-class suburb, her struggle to be a writer would have been harder.

The *Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction in 1976 and was rated as one of the top ten nonfiction books of the decade. As late as 1989 it was still on the trade-paperback best-sellers list. "Although classified as nonfiction/literature, it is difficult to categorize the narrative of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* as conventional in any stretch of the imagination. One of the highly effective and ultra-unique narrative qualities she utilizes in the work is her clever weaving of dream-like recollections, legends, and folk tales with linear progression of events of actual reality. In mid-sentence or mid-paragraph, Kingston alternates between what should be perceived as real and what could be real by approaching both with seriousness and giving each credibility and worth. For example, she tells of the Chinese legend of how white crane boxing was initially invented by a woman who was taught by the spirit of an actual crane. This precedes the reader's following of a girl up into the mountains, where she is taught to be a woman warrior only to have Kingston finish off by conveying memories of her years at Berkeley during the Vietnam conflict. The events are so closely associated that it is difficult to distinguish reality. The purpose of this is to suspend the reader's disbelief just long enough to supply credibility to Kingston's thoughts and ultimately contribute to her wish and dream fulfillment by giving imagined events an ounce of truth" (Daigneault 11/21/96).

"In Maxine Hong Kingston's work *The Woman Warrior*, the technique of several different narrators from several different points of view is used to tell the story of a woman's struggle with identity as a minority in American culture" (Butler 11/19/96).

"Maxine Hong Kingston uses a very effective narrative technique in her writing. She combines legend with truth and past with present. By doing this she ties the American way of life in with the Chinese way of life. It is important to realize the two can coexist. We have been studying this in my anthropology class. When people come to America, they do not have to be part of one culture or another; they can and will be part of both. This is a problem Americans, in particular, have trouble realizing. Anyway, the past integrated with the present is transitional and helps to bridge the gap. Thus far in the novel, each chapter begins with Kingston describing her mother telling a story. Then the book flashes back to that time;

following the story, we are fast-forwarded to present day. Not only does it relate the two cultures, but the jumping around also kind of gives the effect of chaos. This is an important effect because Kingston felt a sense of confusion with identity, being Chinese-American" (Plonk 11/19/96).

Kingston "manages to tell stories from many time periods while the reader feels as if the stories are occurring in the present. It is reminiscent of Poe's line, "Out of SPACE--out of TIME." Kingston digresses to the legend of the warrior woman, for example. During this story, there is no sense that the action is occurring in the past. It is very present, very real. This tone could be the result of Kingston's use of the first person in the case of the warrior woman. She does not write, 'The warrior woman did this or that.' Instead, it is as if the warrior woman is speaking to the reader herself. 'I was a bug riding on a dragon's forehead as it roams through space. It's speed so different from my speed that I feel the dragon solid and immobile.' It is possible that this suggests that Kingston is that warrior woman. But in retelling the story of her mother, Kingston uses the third person. Unlike the story of the warrior, Kingston is not suggesting that she experienced these events and yet the sense of action occurring in the present still exists. This may be due to the great detail that is used in depicting her mother's story. 'Her fingers and palms became damp, shrinking at the ghost's thick short hair.' To have such a grasp on the details of an event requires one of three things: to have been there, to have been told about it over and over again, or to have made the whole thing up. Maybe for Kingston it is a drop of each. She combines some of her experiences with the stories that her mother has repeated to her dozens of times. Then she adds her own embellishments to fit the themes of the book" (Lasher 11/19/96).

"The multiple voices used over the course of the novel let the reader get a glimpse of the story from several different angles. Some narrators are more reliable than others; some act as storytellers (in *White Tigers*), and we don't know whether what we're hearing is just a story or dream, or something that actually contributes to the plot of the novel. Kingston as a little girl is a more effective narrator of actual events that take place, although her cultural separation from the society she is in makes it difficult to decipher what is going on, as in the example of the garbage ghost. An additional theme I thought was interesting in this novel is one that was present in Poe's works. In 'White Tigers' and the talk-stories, we don't know where the true narration ends and where the dream begins. The story gradually becomes less and less believable" (Minis 11/19/96).

Kingston lets "the reader experience 'talk-story' firsthand so that the reader may then be able to relate to Kingston's own experiences with her mother's talk-story" (Wallen 12/5/96).

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine finishes her story of development with a return to her "matrilineage". This reconnection is mediated through that talk story. The daughter continues the story that her mother has started "The beginning is hers, the ending mine", telling about T'sai Yen, a poet who had been abducted by a nomadic tribe, produced two children with the barbarian chieftain, and later was ransomed back to China. T'sai Yen brought her song, "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," back, and it "translated well." For Kingston, T'sai Yen is an emblem of the artist par excellence, whose poetic power is capable of transforming the weapon "the whistling arrow", into a musical instrument. Like the transformed swordswoman in "White Tigers," T'sai Yen is a word warrior who serves as a model for the author of *The Woman Warrior*. Thus, the interpenetrating stories in *The Woman Warrior* provide a link between Kingston's past and present. The central metaphor of the book is a Chinese knot in which various strands are interwoven

into a work of folk art. Kingston, as "an outlaw knot-maker," weaves the past and the present together into an intricate pattern to create her "mother book." By 'talking stories' she successfully builds feminist/matriarchal perspective to counterpoint the traditional Chinese patriarchal viewpoint and unravels a personal yet rooted voice for herself. She decided to take the men's stories out of her first book because they seemed to interfere with what the women of her ilk had to say. Kingston wanted to call this father book "Gold Mountain Heroes." Later, however, she changed the title to *China Men* because she feared the original title might confirm a stereotypical concept that the early Chinese immigrants were merely gold diggers. Moreover, *China Men*, a literal translation of the Chinese characters for Chinese, overturns the use of the pejorative Chinamen. Hence Kingston's neologism at once embattles the historical insult of the Chinese immigrants and proudly acknowledges the ancestral roots of Chinese America.

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